

“This Job is About Public Safety and Assisting Offenders”

Supervising Criminal Offenders in Washington D.C.

By Leonard A. Sipes, Jr.

It is a cold and misty morning in Southwest Washington D.C., and rain falls intermittently as we travel from house to house checking on adult criminal offenders in an area known for crime, drug use, poverty and despair. Joseph C. Alston moves through the community with intimate knowledge of its citizens and its problems. He is a Supervisory Community Supervision Officer, and is in charge of ten Community Supervision Officers—known as Parole and Probation Officers in most parts of the country. He knocks on the doors of people recently released from prison. Some expect his visit, some do not. Our arrival is greeted with a mix of friendly greetings and mild consternation.

Joe enters their apartments with confidence and a smile as he quickly scans the rooms for signs of danger, drugs or weapons, as well as any indicator that the offender is doing well. “Let me see your pay stub,” he politely asks the recipient of our latest visit. The offender is well known to Joe and the other Community Supervision Officers (CSOs) who observe offenders in this part of the District of Columbia. He greets Joe’s request with a smile and produces the document. They discuss drug treatment and the problems, hopes and aspirations of an individual who has seen the inside of many prisons and many programs.

“This job is about public safety and assisting offenders,” Joe says. “Our first priority is to protect the citizens of the District of Columbia. But it’s essential to make sure that offenders have the services they need to transform their lives.”

A New Agency

Joe belongs to a unique federal executive branch agency that Congress established as part of the National Capital Revitalization and Self-Government Improvement Act of 1997. The Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency of the District of Columbia (CSOSA) combined the D.C. Board of Parole and the probation function of D.C. Superior Court into a new federal agency. The D.C. Pretrial Services Agency is also included within CSOSA. After an initial three-year trusteeship, this new independent agency came into existence on August 4, 2000. The designers of the new agency were determined to make CSOSA a research and numbers driven organization that would incorporate the state-of-the-art in community supervision. The principals in CSOSA were determined to get it right and set the benchmark for the country.

There were problems before the establishment CSOSA. Large caseloads hampered the effective supervision of offenders and left little time to assess offenders’ needs and refer them for social services. There was little drug testing. Experience teaches us that in

many cases, effective community supervision depends on linking the offender with much-needed support services. In many cases, this means providing time-intensive assistance to the offender in negotiating a complex bureaucracy.

Research from the National Institute of Justice in the mid 1990's told us that intensive supervision alone would not reduce recidivism. Agencies had to provide tough guidelines and social services that addressed the seemingly endless array of problems that offenders bring to supervision. That combination of accountability and services was lacking. Also lacking were computerization, research and a commitment to performance-based management that could clearly identify whether targets were being reached. There was a need for partnerships with law enforcement, prosecutors and community organizations. During its development, CSOSA put all these necessary elements in place.

CSOSA has some of the lowest supervision caseloads in the country. The ratio for regular supervision is approximately 50 offenders to each CSO. The ratio for special supervision teams is approximately 30 offenders per CSO. There are specialized treatment and supervision teams for sex offenders, mental health, high-risk substance abuse, domestic violence, day reporting and violators of drinking and driving laws. The frequency of contact with these offenders is high. Classified at the upper end of the risk scale, they are seen a minimum of eight times a month, excluding time spent with treatment providers and drug testing professionals.

Unemployed offenders in some parts of the city are required to report to an extensive Day Reporting Program, which focuses on the educational and occupational needs of the clientele. Some offenders are tracked by satellite or other types of electronic monitoring.

Offenders are drug tested twice a week for the first eight weeks of supervision; the frequency of testing declines as the offender demonstrates continued compliance. However, one positive drug test mandates that you go back to the original testing schedule.

CSOSA conducts joint patrols with the Metropolitan Police Department, and conducts Mass Orientations for new offenders with police, staff of the US Attorneys Office, and treatment providers.

The agency has also developed and deployed one of the best automated case management tools in the country. The Supervision Management Automated Records Tracking (SMART) system is one of the most innovative record keeping systems available. Information is electronically shared with all personnel within CSOSA and allied agencies. "SMART" Lite is CSOSA's next generation information management system, operating on small portable computers to accompany personnel wherever they go.

The agency has also developed the "Auto Screener," which will comprehensively assess the offender's risk to the community as well as determine their social needs and prescribe a specific supervision plan for each offender.

CSOSA has established a research and evaluation unit that tracks information collected by the agency through the SMART system. Early indicators of rearrests for probationers, reincarcerations, drug use and revocations back to prison indicate progress. Possibly the most important measurement is the fact that 94 percent of all violations in the last half of 2004 received an immediate response (called an intermediate sanction) from the CSO. A basic tenet of good community supervision is the ability and capacity to respond quickly and appropriately to violations. That is being accomplished within CSOSA.

CSOSA does far more than just monitor offenders under its supervision. CSOSA provides a wide array of services throughout the city that assist offenders with the transformation from a criminal lifestyle to that of a law-abiding taxpayer. Learning Labs are staffed with employment and educational specialists who assist offenders with basic educational and occupational needs. Each year, thousands receive services ranging from GED programs to apprenticeship opportunities and placement in jobs. With CSOSA's assistance, offenders find opportunities for personal and job-related success, many for the first time in their lives.

With agency-funded drug treatment for high-risk offenders, mental health assessments, anger management, domestic violence treatment, and many other initiatives, one can understand that this agency and its personnel are in a unique position to make a difference.

But all of these resources and services are meaningless unless there is a caring individual to make sure offenders are doing what they're supposed to do as well as taking advantage of unique opportunities for success. That's why Joe Alston is making his way through trash filled streets and walking into apartment buildings surrounded by needles and graffiti. He is making sure that offenders are living up to the terms of their probation or parole and are hopefully taking advantage of services.

"You need to get yourself down to the learning lab," he tells one reluctant offender. "You need to get a job to take care of your children. You need to get a future." Joe continues with a list of apprenticeships and job opportunities that are available. He assures the offender that CSOSA has people dedicated to his success. The offender has been through a variety of social service agencies in the past. The complexity and difficulty of dealing with these agencies leads many offenders to despair and failure. Joe assures him that the CSOSA personnel at the learning lab are there solely for him and his success. "They know exactly what you are going through, and they are there to help you. This is something you have to do. You've got to get on your feet, you've got to get moving, and we can help."

With Joe's guidance, the offender begins the process of examining his future with professionals who are trained for that purpose. Without this kind of help and persistence, too many offenders give up on themselves and sink deeper into a life of violence and drugs.

Tough But Fair

“You tested positive for cocaine again,” Liasia S. Fenwick tells the offender sitting in her cubicle on South Capitol Street in Southeast D.C. Liasia has been with CSOSA for a little under 3 years. She was a housing counselor with DC social services and a drug counselor for Maryland parole and probation. New friends are surprised when the young looking Liasia tells them that she works with offenders and makes home visits in high crime areas.

“I told you what the ramifications would be if you tested positive,” she tells the frustrated parolee. The offender offers excuses. He provides explanations, rationalizations, justifications and enough twists and turns to describe a backcountry road. Liasia will have none of it. “Do you think you’re the first offender who’s told me all this?” she asks. “Do you think this is the first time I heard the story?”

Liasia informs the offender that she will apply the sanctions she warned him about when he first started testing positive for cocaine. CSOSA can only fund treatment for high-risk drug offenders, which means those at the middle or bottom of the spectrum must take advantage of in-house drug education or services provided by the District of Columbia government or charitable providers. With his return to drug use, Liasia sees the potential for the individual to blow any progress he has made in rearranging his life. She immediately arranges for a three-way conversation with her supervisor, Joe Alston, and begins making arrangements for the offender to be evaluated for treatment placement.

Liasia sums up her role this way: “Offenders need to understand that you care about their needs and well-being. They also need to understand that you are not going to tolerate illegal behavior. I’m tough but fair. I’m here to listen and I’m here to assist, but I’m not going to allow them to place themselves, their children and the community at risk. If he cannot get with the program, I’ll send him back to prison. I’ll do everything in my power to make sure that he gets the services and assistance he needs to come to grips with a law-abiding life, but I’ll also do everything in my power to make sure that he doesn’t harm individuals or society.”

The Balance

“Maintaining the balance. That’s the challenge of community supervision,” states John W. Milam, Branch Chief in an area spanning Southeast and Southwest D.C. John is responsible for the supervision of approximately 3,500 parolees and probationers residing east of the Anacostia River.

John, who was born in the District of Columbia (like Joe Austin) reinforces the fact that community supervision of criminal offenders only succeeds if that “magical” balance of supervision and services is in place. John has 17 years of experience supervising

offenders. He remembers working with offenders who were employed by his father in the moving business. He remembers that those with a positive outlook and support tended to do well, and those who had poor problem solving skills often failed. "I was curious as to what made some succeed and some fail," he said. "That's what got me into this business, my curiosity as to what makes people succeed."

"I just went to a Mass Orientation of offenders where we assemble those starting their term of parole or probation. We provide an overview of community supervision requirements and available resources and services to make sure that everyone understands what is expected of them and what is available to assist them. I saw an offender that I supervised when I started 17 years ago. Part of the difficulty of this work is experiencing firsthand how difficult it is to assist human beings who struggle with the basics of life. We have to teach offenders how to change their thinking patterns. Some have been so ravaged by drugs and alcohol and a troubled upbringing that they have difficulty deciding what's right for themselves and their children."

"That is the challenge—making sure that we have the right balance of supervision and services," Milam continues. The people who work for me must understand that they have to provide 100 percent effort every day to meet the challenges of the people we supervise. They look to me for leadership, but I look to them for ideas, innovations and strategies. I cannot imagine anything as important for society as what I do for living."

You Have to Have Plan "B"

Anthony L. Taylor has been in the criminal justice system for a long time. He claims that he "knows when to hold 'em, and when to fold 'em." Tony came from the military and used the GI bill to pay for the rest of his college education. After leaving the Army, he went to Montana and became a residential life counselor for a college. He also coached the wrestling team.

"As a coach, you've got to see things through the eyes of other people," he said. "You need to have the ability to evaluate potential and talent. A big part of what we do is to evaluate offenders. I'm happy to assist anyone. It's very rare that I give up. But the challenge of this job is to recognize that somebody is ready to make a change. You have to be ready when they are ready."

From his college wrestling and coaching job, Tony drifted to the Washington/Baltimore metropolitan area where he became a youth counselor at a juvenile facility in Maryland and an assistant teacher at an alternative school for troubled youth. He's even spent time as an aviation security specialist. He's been with CSOSA since September of 2000.

Tony believes that a big part of being successful as a CSO is to have what he calls "Plan B." "You have to be creative everyday," he states. When he discovers an offender is ready to make a change, he is relentless in discovering untapped resources. That opportunity for creativity, combined with learning to gauge the offender's attitude and motivation, he says, makes his job interesting. "We have to make sure that the offender

is ready and we have to make sure that we are ready to assist him. But equally important is making sure he doesn't do something crazy or become a hazard to the community. If we're really going to serve society, we have to look out for the offender's best interest while insisting upon public safety. It can't happen any other way."

350 CSOs

There are 350 CSOs who work for CSOSA. They supervise approximately 15,500 offenders. On any given day, CSOSA employees are walking the streets of the District of Columbia talking to offenders, their families, friends and employers. Each day hundreds of offenders report to field offices located throughout the city to receive that "magical" balance of supervision and services. Hundreds more are reporting for drug testing and a wide array of treatment and educational programs.

To recognize that Community Supervision Officers are the backbone of the agency is an obvious observation. Working with offenders can be one of the most challenging and rewarding jobs any of us have experienced. To ride with police officers or walk through tough neighborhoods and to deal with people with troubling backgrounds could cause most of us to pause. Community Supervision Officers meet these challenges every day.

Through the efforts of its CSOs, the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency is making a positive difference in the District of Columbia. Probation rearrest has dropped from 21 percent of the supervised population in FY 2002 to 13 percent in FY 2004. Since probationers constitute 70 percent of CSOSA's intakes, this drop is a very positive indicator. During the same period, the combined rearrest rate for probationers and parolees remained flat at 18 percent. Reincarcerations, revocations and drug use have all decreased. Homicides and violence have significantly declined in the city since 2002. While the lion's share of the credit must go to the employees of the Metropolitan Police Department, the U.S. Attorney's Office and engaged citizen-based organizations; the women and men of CCOSA feel that they have made significant contributions to public safety.

CSOs are the hub of a wheel in which law enforcement, community organizations and social service agencies collaborate to provide both supervision of, and opportunity for, the individuals placed under CSOSA's jurisdiction. The citizens of the District of Columbia benefit from their dedication.